

Alexander the Great and the substitute king

Kathryn Stevens

Greek authors' confused accounts of a strange incident just before the death of Alexander the Great presented a long-standing puzzle for Classicists. Clay tablets from ancient Iraq provided the key.

Trouble in Babylon

In the spring of 323 B.C., all was not well in Babylon. Seven and a half years previously, Alexander the Great had entered the city in triumph. He had vanquished the Persians at Gaugamela (near modern Mosul, Iraq): their king, Darius, was dead; their immense empire was now his. When he advanced south through Mesopotamia to Babylon, the Babylonians lined the road to their city, hailing the conqueror whom they described in chronicles as 'king of the world'.

Now, Alexander was back in Babylon under less exalted circumstances. In the East he had found not, as he had hoped, the edge of the world, but sickness, death, and eventually mutiny. His relationship with his troops, and even his closest advisers, was increasingly tense. Apart from the miseries they had endured on campaign – relentless rains, scorching desert – Alexander was becoming, in their eyes, disturbingly autocratic. He had attempted to introduce *proskynesis* (the Persian custom of prostrating oneself before the king), and he was elevating Persians to positions of trust. Neither act went down well with the Macedonian nobles, used to being treated as privileged equals. When, they asked themselves, would it all end? The answer was, sooner than they imagined: in early 323, Alexander had only a few months left to live.

Ominous episodes

As if in warning, disturbing things began to happen – or so claimed those who later wrote about the period. Ravens fell dead at Alexander's feet. When divination was performed to assess his fortunes, the victim's liver was found to be missing a lobe – a dire omen. And in May of that

year, a strange incident occurred in the palace in Babylon. Diodorus Siculus (17.116) reports as follows:

While the king (Alexander) was being anointed with oil, and the royal robe and diadem were lying on a chair, one of the natives, a prisoner, was spontaneously freed from his fetters and, escaping the notice of the guards, passed unhindered through the doors of the palace. He went to the royal throne, put on the royal robe, bound his head with the diadem, then sat on the throne and remained quiet.

When the king learned what had happened, he was terrified at the strange event, but approached the throne and without showing his agitation asked the man quietly who he was and why he had done this. When he made no reply whatsoever, Alexander consulted the seers for the interpretation of the portent and put the man to death in accordance with their judgement, so that the evil which was forecast would be turned upon him. He picked up the clothing and sacrificed to the gods who avert evil, but continued to be seriously troubled.

An unknown man appears on the throne; for reasons unclear, this is taken as a terrible portent; for reasons equally unclear, the seers tell Alexander to kill him. What does it all mean? Alexander himself seems at a loss throughout the episode, and for a long time modern scholars were also at a loss as to how to understand it. Nothing in our surviving Greek or Latin sources provides a clue as to what is going on, or why.

Mesopotamia holds the key

The clue came, perhaps fittingly, from Mesopotamia. More precisely, it came from sources in Akkadian, a Semitic language related to Hebrew and Arabic. Akkadian was spoken in ancient

Mesopotamia for several millennia and written on clay tablets in cuneiform script. Since the decipherment of cuneiform in the mid-19th century, the gradual translation of Akkadian texts has transformed our understanding of Mesopotamia and its relationship with the Classical world. In fact, it was a scholar of ancient Mesopotamia, Thorkild Jacobsen, who first spotted that the Akkadian sources could provide the key to the curious incident at Babylon. In Diodorus (and Plutarch and Arrian, who also record the episode) we seem to have a somewhat garbled account of the so-called substitute king ritual.

This ritual was performed in Mesopotamia in response to a bad omen which threatened the life of the reigning king. The king left his throne, went into hiding, and was addressed as 'the farmer' to symbolize his abdication of royal status. Meanwhile, a substitute was enthroned, and the bad omens were ritually transferred to him. The substitute king was treated like the real ruler, until, after a prescribed period of time, he was killed. This fulfilled the omen, dissipated the evil and made it safe for the real king to return. Some of our best evidence for the ritual comes from c. 7th B.C. Assyria (northern Mesopotamia), where court scholars' letters to the Neo-Assyrian kings provide insight into when, why and how it was performed. When we read Diodorus alongside these cuneiform sources, the episode in the throne room makes sense.

The ritual of the substitute king

First, there is the idea of a portent. The substitute ritual in Assyria was triggered by an ominous celestial phenomenon, usually an eclipse. In Diodorus' account, the man himself is taken as a portent. This makes no sense on its own terms, but is explicable as a misinterpretation: the Greek sources have preserved the idea of a bad omen but applied it erroneously to the procedure designed to solve it.

Then there is the procedure itself. The mystery man seats himself on the throne, dressed in Alexander's royal garments and wearing his diadem – the symbol of kingship. This corresponds exactly to the Assyrian ritual, where the substitute would put on the royal robes and ascend

the throne, as reflected in a letter from a scholar to king Esarhaddon (ruled 681–669 B.C.):

Concerning the substitute king of Akkad, the order should be given to enthrone (him). Concerning the clothes of the king, my lord...

The clothing was not just crucial as a symbol of kingship. The evil omens were written on tablets which were physically attached to the clothes of the substitute king, as another scholar reports:

Yesterday I had him hear [the omens] again, and I bent down and bound them in his hem.

The clothing was discarded after the substitute's execution, and sacrifices were performed to dispel the evil. This explains why a troubled Alexander picks up the clothing and makes sacrifices to the 'gods who avert evil'. No reason is given for this in the Greek account, but the logic becomes clear when we know the Mesopotamian background. The same is true of another seemingly random detail: the identity of the intruder, who is said to be a prisoner. On its own this makes the episode more sinister, but it is also a crucial link to the Mesopotamian context: Mesopotamian substitutes included prisoners and political enemies of the king; in other words, those who were 'disposable'.

Scholars, seers, and star-gazers

Sooner rather than later, the substitutes were indeed disposed of, and so too was the unlucky interloper in Babylon. On the advice of the seers, Alexander puts the man to death, 'so that the evil which was forecast would be turned upon him'. This phrase is rather enigmatic on its own, but reflects precisely the Mesopotamian idea that during his 'reign' the substitute king took the evil portents on himself, and that they were terminated by his death. Again a scholarly letter from the Assyrian court neatly sums up the principle:

[Damqî], the son of the prelate of Akka[d], who had ru[led] Assyria, Babylon(ia), [and] all the countries, [di]ed with his queen on the night of [the xth day as] a substitute for the king, my lord, [and for the sake of the li]fe of Šamaš-šumu-uki[n] (the king's son). He went to his fate for their redemption.

As the Assyrian letters make clear, the scholars at court played a major role in the implementation of the substitute king ritual. This too is probably reflected in the Alexander episode. Although the Greek word translated as 'seers' (*manteis*) is not culturally specific, it is likely that here it refers to Babylonian specialists who were overseeing the ritual. Indeed, a couple of

months before the incident in the throne room, Babylonian diviners had tried to prevent Alexander from re-entering Babylon, claiming that 'the configuration of the stars' predicted the king's death (Diod. Sic. 17.112). This is precisely the type of omen which would trigger the substitute king ritual, and May 323 would be within the hundred days for which omens of this type were believed to be valid. Perhaps the Babylonian diviners, whose advice had been ignored the first time, initiated the ritual as a last-ditch attempt to ward off impending doom.

Alexander, local tradition, and Hellenistic kingship

Behind the rather confused account of the Greek sources, then, we can perceive the outlines of a Mesopotamian ritual designed to avert evil and preserve the life of the king. Unfortunately it did Alexander little good: a month later he was dead. For us, however, it is extremely useful. On the one hand, it suggests Alexander's respect for Babylonian scholarship and religion. But more than this, it is evidence of his willingness to engage with Near Eastern traditions of kingship. The hero who liberated the Greeks from Persian despotism here becomes the model Mesopotamian ruler, advised and protected by the seers like generations of Assyrian and Babylonian kings before him.

It is possible that later Classical writers over-emphasised Alexander's 'easternization', to fit a tradition which saw him as increasingly despotic towards the end of his life. But other sources, both Greek and non-Greek, confirm his engagement with local cultures, and his successors followed his example: the Ptolemies took on the mantle of pharaoh in Egypt; the Seleucids prostrated themselves in the temples of Babylon. The case of Alexander and the substitute king is important as one of the earliest signs of a new world order; over the next three centuries, not only kingship but Greek culture itself would be transformed by contact with an array of local traditions across the vast territories conquered by Alexander. But perhaps most importantly, this case shows how 'looking east', and engaging with sources outside the Greek and Latin canon, can help us understand not only the margins of the Greco-Roman world, but even texts, events, and individuals at the heart of the classical tradition.

Kathryn Stevens teaches Classics and Ancient History at Durham University and likes to imagine that Herodotus really did go to Babylon.